

Interview

A Community Bard: Interview with Ahmed Essop

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I interviewed Ahmed Essop at his Lenasia home on 23 October 1999 at about 10h30. His *oeuvre* includes three collections of short stories, *The Hajji and Other Stories* (1978) (which received the Olive Schreiner Award in 1979); *Noorjehan and Other Stories* (1990); and *The King of Hearts and Other Stories* (1998). His two novels are *The Visitation* (1980) and *The Emperor* (1984).

Nadine Gordimer once commented that Essop is simply so true to his insights and observations that nothing appears to be, or is, contrived. Lionel Abrahams observed that Essop's style is simple and direct,

his subtlety is born out of nothing more or less than his fascination with the endlessly varied ways of the human heart. Thence the power to amuse, delight, move and challenge us. Thence an achievement of a timeless sort.

In an endeavour to shift South African Indian writings to the centre of this country's reception, appreciation and teaching of English literature, I found it appropriate to research a community bard who takes up the responsibility of recording individual histories of the 'other', and in the process provides a unique dimension of South African life.

RC How has your background influenced your writing?

AE Well, firstly, I was influenced by my teachers. I attended the Waterfall Indian Islamic Institute which is halfway between Johannesburg and Pretoria and I had wonderful teachers like Krishna Pillay and Rajoo Pillay who were very interested in literature. Even in Standard 4 we were already reading Dickens and I remember in Standard 6, I started to read Conrad. The Principal, Mr Drackmeyer was a man who was interested in the arts, music and literature. We used to read a great deal and reading played a very important part in our lives.

Culturally, of course, the school was a seminary as well, and religious activities played an important part of our learning and education.

I lived in a place called Fordsburg for about 15 years. It was essentially an Indian suburb, but there were people from other groups who also lived there. Nearby was the suburb called, Pageview, also known as Vrededorp. We lived very close to each other, many houses had shared walls and it was a sort of Casbah—a communal existence. People visit you, you talk to your neighbours, and there was this joy in Fordsburg and Pageview. In Lenasia we lived as the whites lived, with high walls and edges and so on, but in Fordsburg and Pageview doors were always open. You could walk into anybody's home at any time. There was no need to phone them and make appointments. People walked in the streets and sat on the porches and verandas and there was a kind of friendship, a close-knit community.

The Majestic and Avalon cinemas were there and we were in close contact with people. Politics was a common topic then and many politicians lived amongst us. There was a square called Red Square where I listened to politicians such as Dr. Dadoo, Mandela and Dr. Moraka, the then president of the ANC. Of course, the police were always present when meetings were being held.

RC What has been your perceptions of South African literature during apartheid?

AE Well, I felt that the human element had to be predominant in our writings. Apartheid formed one aspect of life. There are many other aspects of life. I was exposed to the different aspects of life in the community. There were humour, joy, marriages, funerals and so on. I felt that in my writings I should present a comprehensive whole, rather than selecting one aspect, the apartheid aspect, the aspect of oppression. That was one aspect of our lives. It was not to constitute our entire life.

RC Critics often distinguished between those writers who linked their work with political activism and those that wrote about themes other than protest. Do you see writers that did not write against apartheid as having had a different constituency?

AE If you were not exposed to the apartheid situation, perhaps living in the country, black writers or white writers, could give an account of life in those areas where apartheid did not have an immediate or daily effect. There were also the human relationships and the personal relationships and so on. I see no reason why that should be excluded from literature. It can constitute literature as well. One did not have to write about apartheid if you did not want to.

The realities of apartheid intruded into many of my stories, but the people of Fordsburg achieved a distinctive identity through their personal dilemmas and concerns. South African life involves a complexity of issues, not only apartheid.

RC How did you handle the tension between politics and aesthetics in your writings?

AE I think that one can combine aesthetics with reality. The apartheid situation is an aspect of reality, and art, I think, has to write about reality. So aesthetics and reality, the human experience, have to be combined. The socio-political reality is just one part of my life that I wish to present. I refuse to limit the scope of my art and I also resist the attempt to pigeonhole my writings.

RC Were there any negative aspects of writing during apartheid?

AE Look, there were books that were banned. It could affect the writers who think that if they are going to write about apartheid, nobody is going to publish it. In my own case, I was very fortunate in that I appeared in a time when there were a number of literary journals such as *Contrast*, *Seseme*, *Staffrider*, and other journals which published my writings and there were publishing houses like Ravan Press who were fearless in publishing protest works. *Staffrider* was published by Ravan Press. I was also very fortunate that I had friends such as Lionel Abrahams and Mike Kirkwood who were literary people. Mike Kirkwood, of course, was the director of Ravan Press at that time and he published my works.

RC Which writer, if any, did you admire most and had the greatest influence on your writings? I note that Lionel Abrahams draws parallels between your writings and that of V.S. Naipaul and Bosman.

AE I first of all grew up on Dickens and Conrad. South African literature never appeared in our prescribed lists of readings at school in our times. The first South African book that I picked up was *A story of an African Farm*. Yes, (V.S.) Naipaul was an influence. But, I also read other West Indian writers such as Wilson. I read most of Wilson's works. I have been brought up on English literature. I did a BA and majored in English and then did an Honours in English at Wits. Then I read R.K. Narayan and Ruth Jhabvala whose works I loved, and also Anita Desai. It was these Indian writers who were my favourites. One gets influenced by writers, but it is essential to keep one's own perception, style, and the aesthetic part is one's own. The question is: How are you going to present that work? That you will have to work out on your own.

RC How do you feel about short stories as compared to novels? How do they differ in the actual writing?

AE There are segments of experience that can be put into a short story form and other segments that require a larger canvas. So, I found that I could write a short story in three pages and another in ten. And then, of course, for the novels, *The Visitation* and *The Emperor*, I realised that what I had to say had to take a novel

form. The short story is very demanding because you want to exclude everything that does not focus on what you want to convey in terms of the message. It can be a segment of experience, or it may be a character that I wish to create, or some meaning I wish to convey. But, I have to do that artistically. What I like of the short story form is that I can spend a lot of time on the sentences, syntax, choice of words and the diction. I enjoy the fine workmanship and I also write with a pen and then I type it. So, I am still very primitive in that I do not use the wordprocessor.

RC When you work on short stories do you look for something to link them to make a collection?

AE Well, it can follow quite naturally. Many of my stories are set in Fordsburg and Pageview, and they are linked geographically. Some stories are set in Lenasia and few are set in Eldorado Park, Durban and overseas. But, the stories get linked with their particular locality. I lived there for 15 years, I know the names of the streets, the names of the buildings and I also use the actual names of the area like Fordsburg, Lenasia, and so on. Other writers, of course, invent names like Narayan's Malgudi.

RC Are some of the stories in *Noorjehan and Other Stories* autobiographical?

AE No. I do not write autobiography. There are experiences in life which I draw on. There are people that I know. I recreate that imaginatively so that they are not quite the people that I know. No one has come to me and said, 'look, that's me'. There was no Mr Moonreddy. The writer uses his or her experience. Sometimes the story may be close to a character in the community but it is not the same character. For example, the character Gool, the gangster. There was a man in Fordsburg who had that sort of power and reputation. When I wrote the story, I wanted a man who is very intelligent, and also a man who reads. Apparently, our local gangsters could not read, although they had this great power. Gool also had great admiration for beauty. So, he is quite a different man when compared with the local gangster. And then, of course, in 'The Novel', a story in *The King of Hearts and Other Stories*, a renowned Fordsburg gangster comes to visit me and claims that he is the character in the novel *The Visitation*. He tries to re-enact some of the incidents in the novel. That was one of my funnier stories. Many people identify my stories with our gangsters. A local gangster who passed away a few years ago in Fordsburg was told of this book in which he appeared. He was very pleased. Of course, he could not read (laughs).

RC You have explored major feminist issues on different levels in *Noorjehan and Other Stories*. What made you tackle the question of women's rights?

AE I knew many ladies who were educated at Wits and who taught at the private schools where I taught. I was a teacher for about 35 years. There were many lady teachers and I was very impressed by some of them. Anyway, I never felt that women were inferior to men in intelligence. Some of the girls that I taught were brilliant students and I felt that they could equal men in any way. So, it is the character Zenobia Hansa in *The Emperor* whom we are talking about. As far as Islamic religion goes, the woman has complete rights, even the right to divorce her husband. I needed women characters who are strong.

One must remember that women were never liberated until the industrial revolution, really. When they go to work and they have their own resources, they become independent. I also knew women in the political movement. I was part of the Unity Movement for a period. I was also part of the Black Consciousness Movement for a period and we met in small groups. In Fordsburg, although I was not part of the Indian Congress, I attended many of their meetings and I came to know political figures like Amina Cachalia and her sister. There were many women, like Ruth First, who spoke on platforms. I drew from my experience. None of the women characters are real. I am not writing sociology or biography. I have to re-create and give them qualities. During 1975-1976 when I had problems with the education department there were many men and women who supported me in my struggle with the authorities.

RC Which are your favourite short stories from your own writings and Why?

AE (Hesitation) That is a very difficult question to answer. I enjoyed the whole process of creation and spent a year or two writing some of the stories.

Well, some of the stories that I am close to are 'Noorjehan' and 'The Hajji'. Some experiences in the process of creation of the story are enjoyable. Many of the issues in *The Emperor* were my ideas on education that I presented. Some of the incidents are actual events. For instance, there was a teacher who had been charged in the Chief Magistrate's court for not doing his daily forecast. It was a male teacher, not Zenobia, so in the whole process I had to recreate that. The demands of the novels are quite different from writing a bit of history. 'The Hajji' also seems to appear most often in anthologies.

RC Did you forge any links with other South African Indian writers?

AE In Lenasia I met Ronnie Govender when he came with some of his plays, so I know Ronny. And I know Deena (Padayachee). I met him in Grahamstown. He came to my home and I am in communication with him. Then, of course, there are the poets Farouk Asvat, Essop Patel and Achmad Dangor. There was a period when there was a writer's organisation called PEN. But, eventually, that was dissolved. Today I do not meet any writers.

RC Is there a valid category called South African Indian writings?

AE Yes. That category relates to a particular group of people and their experiences in their own localities created by apartheid. But, I think, even if there was no Group Areas Act, Indians would live together, in that we share certain cultural values and there is also a joy in community living.

My stories manifest themselves most immediately as mirrors on the life of the Indian community, and in a larger sense, South Africa as a whole. A tale like 'Jericho Again' bemoans the apartheid demolition of Fordsburg and the exile of the inhabitants to Lenasia.

There is enough South African Indian literature already, and the more that we have the better. This is a new era now. Indians are moving away from their group areas, but areas like Lenasia will lie intact for many years, I think, because of shared values. I think all of our writers are not writing parochially, they are also dealing with human nature, and human nature is essentially the same all over the world, although values are shifting.

During apartheid very few South African works were prescribed at schools. Now, some writings are prescribed. What can happen is that we will have the emergence of more Indian writings although reading and writing is on the decline because of the advent of TV.

RC How have the critics received your writings? Has this informed your subsequent writings?

AE Well, I have been very pleased. Generally it has been very positive. Whatever I wrote was not confined to Indians only. I always tried to present a larger human dimension—not only here but also outside. One of my stories has been translated into German, several into Dutch and French. *The Hajji and Other Stories* and *The Visitation* were published as a one volume edition by Readers International in New York and London. Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre has been trying to translate two of my novels into French.

RC What are your reflections on the House of Delegates banning of *The Hajji and Other Stories* as a school text in 1984 based on religious grounds?

AE It was prescribed in 1984 and recommended by the English Society of the Indian Teachers Association. Thirteen to fourteen thousand copies were bought by schools in Lenasia and Natal. After about three months, the book was withdrawn. No reasons were given. The Hindu Maha Sabha in Durban objected to the story about the Hindu firewalker and complained that a character in the book referred to the sari as an ugly Hindu garment. It was taken out of context. Characters comment in texts; I deal with characters and realities and it is not Ahmed Essop saying that. I created a character who had a particular vision about certain things. The Maha Sabha felt that I

had attacked the Hindu community. If the character makes positive or negative comments about something that is not my view, it is the character's view. I am dealing with the world of human beings and human beings have different views about different objects. And I had to create a comprehensive picture of life if it is going to be worth anything.

I am not sure if they did not use this to get back at me. The authoritarian hand of the education department persecuted me by arbitrarily transferring me to four different schools in one year. I took them to court and a protracted three-year court case came to nothing. They felt embarrassed that the man that they put out of teaching now had a book on the school's prescribed list. The director of Indian education had dictatorial powers and he did not have to give reasons for his actions.

RC What have you been reading recently?

AE I continue reading South African writings and the few journals that are still around. I also read history, philosophy, and so on. At present, I read about the new era. One era has passed and a new era has arrived. I question how people live in the new era, how they perceive it, and how they see the future.

RC Are you working on any new material at the moment?

AE I have finished my third collection of stories. There are a number of stories there that deal with this present era and my own vision of where I see it going. I have some ideas for a few stories that I will work on.

RC What message do you have for the readers out there?

AE When reading declines, civilisation declines. There is a lack of appreciation of the beauty of a sentence, and of poetry. Our teachers do not read, they only read prescribed works. Neela Alvarez-Pereyre, when she visited from France, mentioned that people in academic circles in this country have not heard of my texts. The writings from India, Australia, the West Indies and Canada are the great rivers that flow into the ocean of English Literature.

We must read the literature of Britain, but also 'other' writings as well. If you have not read writings from India then you have not read a dimension of English literature. It is the same case with South African Indian writings.

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Laduma by Alfred T. Qabula

Laduma landindiza lakhiza lakhemezela
Ingani bayithintile iminyovuu neziqandu
Lapho inqonqozo inyathi isithi umpondo nesihlanu ngelanga
Abaqashi abayishayangamkhuba
Bona bathi eyiti sheleni ngelanga.
Babe bayithintile iminyovu, iziqandu zagcwa'umgwaqo.

Imikhumbi yanqwabelana olwandle
bakh'al'onxiwankulu bathi wasenza Phungula
Ingani abadlali bengoma uthe mabadube, khona sizokufa yindlala
Ishwa laphuma nawe mfoka Phungula
Onxiwankulu baz'ukuthi uma uhol'abantu
Abantu benza lokh'obatshele khona

Yab'ibhonga ibhukud'inyathi
Nemikhumbi ayibanga nabo abethuli
Ngubazi babuza kwaba nolwazi ukuthi
Ngubani oyithintil'inyathi ?
Laduma lamthath'okaPhungula
Ingani abakwasidlodlo bamhlafuna bamshwabadela ?
Bamgalela kwebandayo izisele
Besithinguy'umsusi wothuthuva ?

Kunjenje yiwena othe abayibeke phans'insimbi.
Phungula hambubatshele bay'emsebenzini
Ulaphanje yimisebenzi yakho.
Angithi yiwen'ushumayeli wevangeli lobukhomanisi ?
Lababantu usubabaphendule amahlongandlebe
Abasezwafutho abalutshelwa abaqashi babo

Angithi sowabagxisha izimfundiso zamakhomanisi
Sebemakhand'alukhuni ngathi bakhula beselus'amabhubesi
Singakusiza thina ngoba siyezwelana nawe,
akukuhle ukuba ubelapha, uyindoda ehloniphekile
Singakuyisa kubo wen'ubatshele bakhohlwe abakucelayo
Mababuyel'enkomeni sebezoholelwa u eyiti sheleni ngelanga
Wen'uzokuba sewukhululekile ngokwenzenjalo

Yaqhamuka iveni intengantenga ihlomeka
Uphaphe selungathi yisiswebhu somshayili wespani sezinkabi
Yema, qede abakwasidlodlo bamehlisa okaMsapho.
Wema, wabingelela, Shaka Bayeethe Zuuulu
Amadashi abona ukuthi uGeneral Botha walwa

Aseqala ukuthi abamnyama balunge kakhulu
Masilwele ukufa nokuphila desikuthole esikudingayo
Angazi ukuthi uzakubayini umphumela walokhu ?
Njengokuba izwe sebasephuca lona
Niyabona manje? sibambela igolide nedayimani
Bona inye kuphela into abayenzayo.
Bahlala kweziphakeme izihlalo
Yingani bengasiniki okwanele okuyizidingo zethu
Abamhlophe bathi manginitshale nibuyel'ebenzini
Khona bezakungidedela,
ngoba akungifanelanga ukuhlal'ejele
Mina ngimisele ngokufa, nokudonsa ejele ukuze ngilimel'iqiniso
Zaphendul'izinyathi zathi
Abamhlophe mabangacabangi ukuthi,
isiteleka lese akusona esikaPhungula
Siteleke ngoga sifuna ukusebenzela umpondo nesihlanu nglanga
Kade basiqala besixhaphaza, manje bafik'ekugcineni

Zadidizela izibonkolo, zaphithizela iziqandu,
yaveva iminyovu, uyoguga ubazi abantu
Yanqwabelana imikhumbi olwandle
Zagcwal'igaz'izinhliziyi kubaqashi bagcwalizibhedlela
Ingani siyavunguz'isiphepho ? ashw'axeg'amadolo kumatilosi
Yibambeni zinkunz'ezimidwayidwa kukuxhatshazwa nencindezelo

Igaleto lenu liyezwakala, ngish'umhlaba wonke uyenanela
Zinsizwa zakwa Sibitolo qinani nigwale amandla,
umzabalazo wenu ungowabo bonke basebenzi baseMzans'Afrika
Kade basiqala besixhaphaza, besicindezela, namanje basaghubeka
Masiyilwe ngobumbano lempi mAfrika ukuze siyinqobe.
Shaka Bayeethe Zuuulu.
Ngu Thembe.